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## **NPR Poll Shows Parents Want School Choice and Local Control, *not* Higher Taxes**

The topic was education. The results held important information for policymakers and legislators. But their headline was way off.

Last week, National Public Radio (NPR) reported on a poll that it conducted along with the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. The story was titled, "New Poll Shows Americans Are Willing to Pay Higher Taxes for Better Schools," because a majority of respondents said they would be willing to raise their taxes by \$500 per year to achieve a few defined educational reforms in their community.

Following the poll, however, NPR interviewed several respondents and found their support for higher taxes is not all that it seems. Through the polling results and these subsequent interviews, we learn:

- **Some respondents' support for tax increases amounts to supporting higher taxes *for other people*, because they themselves would not be liable for the increase;**
- **One respondent, perhaps speaking for many, stated flatly she cannot afford the tax increase she supports; and**
- **Many respondents distrust government's ability to improve schools — particularly that of the federal government — and prefer returning control over schooling to parents and localities.**

Take Kathy Gutierrez (as her name appears in Lexis/Nexis) of San Antonio, Texas. Ms. Gutierrez told pollsters she would be willing to raise her taxes by \$500 a year to improve the schools she says are failing her dyslexic daughter. Though her response seems straightforward, her further statements indicate her support for higher taxes is not what it seems.

- **According to the Heritage Foundation, Ms. Gutierrez (a single mother of four earning less than \$20,000 a year) *would pay no federal taxes to begin with*, and may receive cash payments through the earned income credit.**

- NPR's poll reports 45 percent of those earning less than \$20,000 per year favor the \$500 tax hike. Yet if these people have one or more children, whether married or single, they pay no federal income tax.
- Ms. Gutierrez and others like her may support a tax hike because *they reasonably expect they will not have to pay, while others will*. That may have been what Ms. Gutierrez had in mind when she told NPR she is "sure she couldn't afford" the \$500 tax increase herself.

In fact, respondents also made it clear they do not want to give the federal government more control over schools but instead want local control of education. The poll found:

- 89 percent of the public favors standardized tests for teacher competency,
- 95 percent favor standardized tests to identify where students need help,
- 87 percent want tests "to ensure students meet adequate national standards,"
- 67 percent favor tests to determine whether students move up a grade, and
- 57 percent want standardized tests "to rate/rank schools."

However, when asked who should administer these tests, parents favored local school districts (42 percent), private organizations (22 percent) and state governments (18 percent) over the federal government (15 percent). Further, consider Karen Polumbo, a Vermont resident and a mother of four, who said this to NPR about a \$500 tax increase:

*It's big government that I don't trust. If I could hand this check to my superintendent, I'd be very confident that, you know, I was doing the right thing. If I had to send it to my state government, no.*

While parental confidence in far-off government bureaucrats is scant, the poll showed that parents increasingly support reforms such as school choice that give parents more control over their children's schools.

- Twenty-three percent of parents polled already have exercised school choice by moving their child from an unsatisfactory school to a better one.
- When pollsters asked parents a slanted question about expanding parents' ability to choose where their kids attend school, choice lost (46-51).
- However, among parents who had heard enough about school choice to formulate an opinion, choice won 36 percent to 29 percent (though both findings are within the margin of error for parents).

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